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Paler Than Truth: The Problem of the Washington Novel

by Tom Bethell

Because so many Washington novels are written by journalists, many of the flaws of the profession are mirrored in the novels. One such weakness of Washington journalists, especially the older generation of journalists, is their tendency to become the custodians of secrets. They accumulate them as a magpie collects scraps of bright glass. A journalist worth his salt, after he has been here a few years, will be at the eye of a hurricane of secrets. He will not, of course, share them with his readers. To do that would be to write his way out of his charmed "inner circle," to betray his secret society. Journalists in Washington, I believe, often tend to prize discretion above all other virtues. They become circumscribed, and in the end hamstrung, by the requirement that they honor the code, respect the agreement, preserve the silence, maintain the confidentiality. That way they get closer to the center—the center of what in Washington is always called "power"—power having an intimate connection with knowing secrets and not disclosing them. If a journalist breaks the code, of course, then he is automatically banished to the circumference, where the power is weak, the secrets not worth knowing.

So, a lot of journalists here know a lot, but as a rule they are constitutionally unable to write down a good deal of what they know. Some don't mind at all. Others regard it as a pity and come to the conclusion that there must be *some* way of getting it all down on paper without being banished to the intellectual-beltway, and so they decide to write a novel. This explains the origin of a good many Washington novels, e.g., *In The National Interest*, by Marvin Kalb and Ted Koppel. "Sometimes you can really say things in fiction form that you can't express in non-fiction," says Marvin Kalb, who works for CBS-TV and presumably wants to go on working there. "If anyone is inter-

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